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HEADLINE: Conway says race not top priority; Endorsing O'Malley over black candidates brings out critics;
Legislator defends choice

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SOURCE: SUN STAFF

BODY:

The night before City Councilman Martin O'Malley announced his mayoral bid, a concerned state Sen. Joan Carter Conway phoned him, raising one question:

"Are you sure you want to do this?"

She knew that as a white mayoral candidate in a city where two-thirds of the residents and voters are black, O'Malley would be viewed as a political opportunist, banking on African-American front-runners splitting the black vote.

Conway, who is African-American, also knew that if O'Malley entered the race, she would feel a strong emotional and political debt toward a man she considered a friend. He had helped her in her City Council and state Senate campaigns in Northeast Baltimore.

He also had raced to bail her out of jail after her February run-in with police, who accused her of blocking paramedics from helping an injured child. O'Malley served as her attorney and the charges were dropped.

Tuesday, Conway ended her agonizing. Standing next to O'Malley in a vacant lot across from her district office, Conway became the city's first black political leader to endorse his mayoral candidacy.

Acknowledging that she would become a "target" for backing a white candidate, Conway said in effect that she was going with her political loyalties. Her announcement was followed Thursday by endorsements of O'Malley from other African-American politicians -- including state House Appropriations Committee Chairman Howard P. Rawlings -- and suddenly the otherwise routine endorsement of one politician by another was being viewed as a potential turning point in the mayor's race.

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"I would love to see a black mayor," Conway explained later. " But the black mayor piece is not the most significant piece to me. The most significant piece is to get the job done."

The endorsement did not come without cost. City Council President Lawrence A. Bell III chastised Conway for supporting O'Malley, and his campaign manager, Julius C. Henson, called her a "pseudo-Negro" for abandoning racial solidarity.

From the outset, Conway said race hadn't been the issue.

Conway said Bell and former City Councilman Carl Stokes, another leading African-American in the race, had faltered in the 42 days after O'Malley announced, while O'Malley, she said, emerged as a candidate with vision.

"I knew if Martin was a black guy, we wouldn't have a problem," Conway said. "The safe thing to do would be not to take a position. That's not my nature."

In shedding light on how O'Malley gained her support, Conway also indicated how Bell lost her backing.

In 1995, Conway became the first African-American and the first woman elected to the City Council from the 3rd District. She ran on a ticket with O'Malley and Robert Curran, and all three supported Bell as the City Council president. The group ran on a platform of independence from the administration of Mayor Kurt L. Schmoke. Bell became council president by winning two districts: his own in West Baltimore and the 3rd.

After serving one year, one month and one day on the council, Conway was appointed to the state Senate, replacing John A. Pica Jr., who resigned -- she was subsequently elected -- and became the district's highest-ranking politician. In looking back at her former colleagues on the City Council, Conway saw Bell distancing himself from the other old allies.

After four years of fighting the Schmoke administration, Bell turned to Schmoke ally Claude Edward Hitchcock to serve on his campaign finance committee. Most recently, Schmoke political manager Larry S. Gibson has appeared at forums and rallies with Bell supporters, who say that Gibson, a lawyer and professor, isn't playing a prominent role in the campaign.

O'Malley, before beginning his campaign, had asked Conway to run for mayor to ensure that the district's interests would be served.

"I don't want to see business as usual," Conway said. "The business-as-usual syndrome made me step back. I can't sell my soul."

Bell is saying he has been betrayed. At the city Board of Estimates meeting last week, Bell lashed out at O'Malley, calling him a "hypocrite" and a "chameleon." Bell says O'Malley rode his coattails through the council and that he introduced O'Malley in the city's black neighborhoods -- connections Bell says O'Malley is now capitalizing on.

At a rally Thursday, where Bell supporters disrupted the O'Malley endorsement, Bell backers carried signs that read: "Jesus had Judas, Bell has O'Malley."

Conway doesn't see it that way.

Before making her pick, she also looked at Stokes, whom many saw as a safe bet. Conway was leaning toward Stokes before revelations that Stokes falsely claimed a college degree.

" The most devastation was self-induced," Conway said of the effect of Stokes' claim on his campaign. "We all make mistakes."

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Conway believes O'Malley has stood out in the 26-member field at city forums, showing the leadership, integrity, passion and commitment that she believes city residents want in the next mayor.

The Baltimore election board disqualified a 27th candidate, Republican Dorothy C. Joyner-Jennings, Friday for not filing a financial disclosure.

As she prepares to take to the streets for O'Malley, Conway believes she made the right choice. She knows from working in a biracial district with O'Malley that he recognizes that the city's needs extend beyond racial lines.

"People say to me, 'Oh, if Martin gets in the city is going to become all white,' " Conway said. "I know better."

CORRECTION-DATE: September 3, 1999

CORRECTION:

And an Aug. 8 article inaccurately stated that Gibson appeared at forums and rallies with supporters of City Council President Lawrence A. Bell III. An article published in the Aug. 27 editions of The Sun incorrectly attributed a statement to political strategist Larry S. Gibson concerning the campaign of Republican candidate Carl Adair. Gibson never told The Sun that he believed that if Adair can win the September primary, city voters might cast November ballots along racial lines. A subsequent article published on Aug. 28 wrongly listed Gibson as Adair's campaign manager. He has no formal role in the campaign. And an Aug. 8 article inaccurately stated that Gibson appeared at forums and rallies with supporters of City Council President Lawrence A. Bell III. The Sun regrets the errors.

GRAPHIC: PHOTO(S) Endorsement: State Sen. Joan Carter Conway is backing Councilman Martin O'Malley for Baltimore mayor.

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